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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this report is to aid those involved in the orientation of freshmen by providing insights about expectations and myths that entering students bring to campus. The author suggests that the best, but impossible method of understanding the entering freshman would be a personal interview. An alternate approach is the Student Orientation Survey, a compilation of 31 incomplete sentences about college life and the entering freshmen. The survey was administered during summer orientation programs throughout the state of 155 randomly selected freshmen and their responses summarized. No single generalization is made, but the results include the students' reasons for entering college: (1) training for a vocation; (2) being better able to cope with life; (3) becoming more educated; and (4) achieving success. Their expectations are also recorded: (1) anticipating change in the environment; (2) learning how to adjust to the change; (3) hoping for understanding professors; and (4) expecting to reduce their disorientation. Also presented are some immediate personal problems which freshmen feel they must solve. (Author/MC)

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for

THE ORIENTATION COMMITTEE

STATE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE AT OSWEGO

BY

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ASSISTANT DEAN OF STUDENTS

SEPTEMBER 1969

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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The world prayed as Neil Armstrong slowly stepped down the ladder on to the surface of the moon. For centuries man had studied the lunar orb from afar and speculated on its nature. From the ancient civilization's "house of the gods", to Galileo's first faltering attempts to search its surface with a telescope, to sophisticated unmanned satellites, man had speculated and theorized about the nature of our closest neighbor. Poets had written of its beauty and science fiction writers of its potential for adventure. Millions upon millions of man hours had been spent in thought about the moon, but always from afar. Then the climax was reached. The world prayed and in one short step Neil Armstrong proved and disproved a million theories held by a billion men. He was there!

Some parallels can be drawn between man's first step on the moon and a freshman's first step on the college campus. The freshman has been exposed to many theories about college. From his parents pleas of "this is your big chance; the chance we never had", to his teacher's "this is a terrible paper", to the newspapers' view of "campus revolutionaries in action", to the late show's Bing Crosby with a coed, blonde and shapely, on "the old ox road", to last year's best friend, "...parties ...girls. You can't believe...", the entering freshman has been bombarded with impressions and theories about college. His first step will be no less uncertain and hardly less dangerous.

The purpose of this report is to reduce this uncertainty by providing those persons who are involved in the orientation of freshmen with insights about the expectations and myths that entering students bring to campus. These expectations are extremely important since the approach that freshmen take to learning and living on the campus is based upon the way they view campus reality rather than upon the reality itself. Snygg and Combs have observed that:[1]

> ....behavior is completely determined by the perceptual field at the moment of action. From this point of view, then, the process of education is fundamentally a process of change in the field. Behavior is determined by the field, and the way to change behavior is to change perceptions.

1. Snygg, Donald and Coombs, Arthur. Individual Behavior. New York: Harper and Row, 1959.

If orientation is, in this sense, education and if education is changing behavior by changing perception, then this exploration will help those persons who are changing behavior to know what modifications they must make. Without this knowledge, any approach to education must be haphazard.

It is not the purpose of this paper to suggest the means or the ends of the process of orientation, but rather to explore the beginnings. Obviously each person involved in orientation must arrive at intuitative answers about the means and the ends for himself. At the same time, however, he must be aware of the beginnings. No one more clearly sees his objective than a man lost in the forest. No one more clearly understands the means of arriving at that object. He is lost, not because of a problem with means or ends, but because he has no idea of his beginning. This beginning is key to his survival.

One of the best methods of understanding the field of the entering student would be to interview him individually and in depth. In the give-and-take of an open, face-to-face contact, the freshman would be free to express his hopes, fears, and expectations. He could tell the interviewer what he hopes to gain from college, what he expects to find when he arrives on the campus, and what problems concern him. In the give-and-take of hundreds of interviews the interviewer would gain an understanding of the student's beginnings.

Obviously, the task of bringing hundreds of entering freshmen into direct contact with the hundreds of persons involved in directing orientation is impossible. The number of hours spent in the interviewing process alone staggers the imagination. If there are three hundred persons involved in directing orientation, and each interviews one hundred freshmen (a reasonable sample), thirty thousand hours of interviews would be required. Each freshman would have to undergo nineteen hours of interviews. While the results might be desirable, such a program would be beyond the scope of any orientation program. Still, the difficulty of the task does not relieve those in orientation from the responsibility of understanding the freshman's

beginnings.

One tentative approach to the collection of pertinent data about freshmen is the Student Orientation Survey. The SOS is a compilation of thirty-one incomplete sentences about college and the entering freshman. Each subject is asked to complete all sentences. The result is an overview of his hopes, aspirations, and concerns. The SOS is in effect a short, directed, confidential interview yielding considerable insight into the subject's perceptual field. While the areas to be explored in the SOS are carefully defined the responses of the subject are undefined and can be infinate. When the results of many completed SOS's are combined, patterns of the group begin to emerge. The SOS, however, has a major disadvantage, since an indefinite number of responses are possible, emerging patterns are often difficult to define precisely.

During the summer orientation programs held across the state, the SOS was administered to a randomly selected sample of one-hundred and five entering freshmen. The remainder of this paper is an attempt to summarize the results of their responses.

Perhaps the most important request to make of an entering freshman is to explain his reasons for attending college, since programs and curriculum will be judged by the freshman, in large measure, by their relevance to his objectives. Entering freshmen were asked to describe the most important value of the college degree. Slightly more than half of the respondents (54%) indicate that the value of a college degree was related to future vocational success. Entering college freshmen who responded in this fashion were not necessarily cynical about gaining a degree to insure their vocational aspirations. Many had set objectives for themselves and felt that the degree was the means of attaining those objectives. The remainder of the respondents did not mention vocational success as the value of a degree. Similar proportions (16%) indicated that the value of the degree was based upon the knowledge underlying the degree, as indicated that the main value of the degree was the satisfaction of a job well done. The remainder (14%) of the responses were not classifiable

under this scheme.

While these catagories are not mutually exclusive or contradictory, the students who indicated the major value of a degree was vocational, have a different set of priorities than do those who indicate knowledge or satisfaction. Program and curricular relevance would be defined differently by them. A student whose highest value was personal satisfaction would find a different experience relevant. To speculate further, marks would have a very different set of meanings to each of these groups. To vocationally-oriented students they would likely be "the coin of the realm", but would not directly be as ego-linked as they would to the student who saw the greatest value in a degree as satisfaction. They would assume less importance to the knowledge-oriented student.

A word of caution is appropriate at this point. It is convenient to summarize responses under the labels vocationally-oriented, knowledge-oriented, and satisfaction-oriented, but these terms themselves are broad and there is considerable variance between the extremes of each catagory. This is most clear among the students who made largely vocational responses, some were idealistic, "... it [a college degree] can help you to do something useful and worthwhile. (F.Education)"[2] and others were cynical, "... it [a college degree] serves not as a measure of knowledge, but as a step for a job. (M.Undecided)". This variance precludes the assumption that all freshmen in a given category see that category in the same way. The similarity that exists is, by the nature of the instrument, very broad. It is also important to recognize that any given individual has, at any time, many priorities and values; this survey only attempted to elicit the most important one in the eyes of the student.

Still, it is important to recognize that, while the majority of entering freshmen view college in vocational terms (54%), a very large minority (46%) have different priorities.

(F.Education) indicates that respondent was a female planning to major in education

Here are some specific responses to the item: "The most important thing about a college degree_____."

"...is that the person can officially do what he went to college for." (F.Geography)

"...is that it allows you to get the job you want." (F.Art)

"...it gets a job." (M.I.A.)

"...is that it means something to you." (F.Undecided)

"...is the amount of money you will make." (M.I.A.)

"...is what you can do with them. (F.Sec.Ed.)

While the college degree was seen in rather specific terms, the product of the college, "an educated person", was only dimly perceived by the entering freshman. In general, entering freshmen tended to feel that the educated person was more competent than the uneducated, but the areas of competence were rarely well defined. In other words, entering freshmen tended to consider the educated person as different, but no consensus emerged about the quality of that difference. About one out of every five (20.2%) of the entering freshmen saw the difference in material advantages, but the great majority tended to define the educated man in non-material ways. Intuitively, the responses tend to point to the educated person as one who is open to his experiences and is aware of others. "...is more tolerant toward fellow man; he sees shades of grey in his life. (M.Chemistry),"...has a much better outlook toward life." (M.I.A.) There is little consensus as to how he gains wisdom, but he is perceived to be somewhat wiser.

Not all agree that the "educated man" is better able to cope with life than the uneducated. In fact, one out of every twenty react negatively to the term. "...tries to impress with his education?" (M.Math) Still, most agree that an educated person is better off, but the reasons are nebulous and personal.

Here are some specific responses to the item: "An educated person usually_____."

"...knows bigger words, but very little about life." (M.Undecided)

"...is one who is a decent and commendable person." (F.English)

"...enjoys life more than an uneducated one does." (M.Pre-med)

"...is a well-rounded person." (F.Math)

"...has an educated air - sounds educated when speaking." (F.English)

"...tries to impress people." (F.Sec Educ)

In spite of the fact that there is no clear conception of an "educated man" among entering freshmen, they know what they want as individuals. When asked to describe themselves at age thirty, the overwhelming majority indicated that they wanted to live a normal, middle-class life. Eighty-six percent of the sample indicated that they wanted a house, security, and children. Probably these are the very same kind of responses that their parents would hope that they would have made. Each of the eighty-six percent in his own way expects to strive for and to achieve a measure of success. Responses are often specific, "When I am thirty, I expect to be a doctor with a good practice." (M.Pre-med) or "...to be teaching, have a husband and family, and have a nice home." (F.English). But in general, it could be said that students wanted to take their place in American Society.

Many of the remaining fourteen percent indicated that they were more insterested in the kind of person they were becoming. While this type of response is more difficult to catagorize, in general these students hoped to be wiser, more mature, and open-minded. In effect, they saw themselves as "educated" in the best sense of the term. Perhaps their aspirations were summed up in the response: "When I am thirty, I expect a much broader understanding of the world, its problems and pleasures and how to cope with them." (M.Liberal Arts). In general, while students had trouble dealing with the "educated man" as an abstraction, their picture of themselves at thirty was very clear and specific. They want to take their place as part of the establishment.

Here are some responses to the item, "When I am thirty, I expect_____."

"...to be teaching and married." (F.History)

"...to be a doctor." (M.Pre-med)

"...to be married." (M. Mathematics)

"...to be married and have a good job." (F. Sociology)

"...to be married." (M. Chemistry)

"...to have a good job, a home, and a family. (M. Sec Education)

Entering freshmen are coming to college for the same basic reasons that students have entered college for generations. They are seeking a way to achieve success and a better way of life. For some, this is based primarily on an increased vocational competence, while for others knowledge and satisfaction are the motivators. This does not imply that they will not experience severe changes during their college years. In fact, these changes in perception are essential if the institution is to have an impact. It does not imply that the society which these freshmen will enter is the same as the one that existed in the past. It does mean that entering freshmen see the college experience as a way to become a part of American society and the college degree as a means of insuring their security and happiness.

There is a very real danger in this generalization. Many students chose different patterns of responses indicating different ways of viewing the college experience. Probably they will react differently than our generalization implies. Alternatives should be available to them. Nonetheless, an orientation program should provide many opportunities to help entering freshmen begin their exploration of the meaning of education and intellectualism at least initially in terms of life-styles and the meaning of success. If the starting point is discouraging, then each individual in orientation must define the way it is discouraging and consider ways of changing the frame-of-reference it represents. If it is encouraging, he must seek the means of reinforcing it. At all times the orienting individual must be aware of the fact that the mode is only the best description of a group. It does not describe every individual in either dept or in richness. Its primary justification is that it is far superior to ignorance or false assumptions.

The SOS also provides a useful glimpse of the entering freshmen's views and expectations for his future environment, Oswego. Since people tend to see what they expect to see and behave in terms of their personal reality, these expectations will be a major determinant of initial patterns of adjustment and hence will form deep impressions throughout an individual's college career. "As the twig is bent, so will the tree go" has fantastic implications for orientation. Initial expectations are the main bending force; orientation is simply a number of modifications in the direction.

Entering freshmen present a wide variety of expectations about their future at Oswego. In a sense, any description of these expections is somewhat presumptuous on the basis of reaponses to the SOS, since the patterns that emerge are not clear. Still, a description of model responses may be useful in understanding the initial reaction of the entering freshman.

If a common thread runs through the responses of entering freshmen, it is change. Entering freshmen expect to find life at Oswego different from their previous experiences. Freshmen expect a "...new and different life." (F.Education) or "...'life' is very different from small-town life." (F.Sociology). They tend to see these differences in terms of moving into a culture made up of and for young people. The best statement of this feeling is perhaps this one: "I expect to find that Oswego is a great academic, social gathering place for kids my age." (M.Mathematics) Some react to this difference in terms of the new society in which they will be living. A number (16%) anticipate a "friendly" place, while another group (10%) especially mention the "hard work". Still others (7%) see it as a place in which they will develop and mature. Others (2%) expect to be frightened by their experience. In general, however, the most common response seems to indicate that most freshmen look forward to a socially exciting and intellectually stimulating environment, rather different from any previous experience. Some express real enthusiasm (9%); "...is a great place, since that's what everyone who has gone there says."

(F.English), and most (89%) are positive about their entrance into their new environment.

Some typical responses to the item "I expect to find that Oswego_____." are:

"...will change me, hopefully a better person." (M.Science)

"...is really what I don't expect it to be." (F.History)

"...will prepare me for the future" (F.Mathematics)

"...will help me become a better person." (F.History)

"...is a good place to live and study." (M.History)

"...is a nice place to stay and live in." (M.Science)

"...will be a welcome relief from high school." (M.English)

"...was a good decision on my part." (M.I.A.)

In summary, entering freshmen expect a new and different experience, but they have trouble defining the characteristics of that experience. The College and University Environmental Scales studies of Dr. Walker should shed further light on the specifics.

Although freshmen have trouble in defining the quality of their new experience, they are very clear in the expectations they hold for their professors. In general, they expect their professors to be warm, understanding, helpful people. The qualities that the entering freshman assigns to his professor sound like a description of the ideal father. When asked about their hopes for professors, typical replies are: "I hope that my professors will be individuals who will relate and be concerned about students." (M.Mathematics) or "I hope that my professors are able to bring themselves to my level." (M.Chemistry) or "I hope that my professors will be people one can identify with and discover with." (F.Languages) Entering freshmen appear to be searching for a guide through the dark tunnels of academia.

The most common response (33%) to a description of professors expressed the hope that they be understanding of the student as an individual. One student said it this way, "I hope that my professors will be interested and concerned about my individual problems." (F.Science). Other common descriptive statements express the hope

that professors be interesting (11%) and helpful (10%). Another group hopes that professors will not be too hard on them (6%) and another (1%) hopes for a challenge.

Perhaps even more interesting were the omitted responses. No student used terms like "scholar", "authority", "expert in his field", to describe their hoped-for professor. In fact, the person they described sounded more like the ideal secondary school teacher in terms of the emphasis on his personal qualities and his ability to be interesting, than a highly qualified expert in his field. Little was said about political beliefs of the teacher (1% wanted a liberal professor, 1% wanted a conservative, and 1% a middle-of-the-road), and nothing about research.

Typical responses to the item, "I hope that my professors are_____." included:

"...are brief and to the point and easy to understand." (F.Anthropology)

"...can teach well and know their subject." (F.French)

"...understand my problems." (M.Pre-med)

"...have a genuine interest in their students." (F.Sec. Education)

"...get to know one." (M. Political Science)

"...are concerned about students personally." (M. I.A.)

As might be expected, entering students indicated, in general terms, that they most needed to know how to adjust to their new environment. This is certainly not a startling revelation. However, when entering freshmen's view of adjustment is further analyzed several extremely interesting opportunities for orientation present themselves. The largest group of students (28%) indicated that they most need to understand the expectations of the college for them both academically and socially. The general impression that was given was that entering freshmen would strive to meet those expectations, if they were made clear. Comments like "The one thing I really need to know about college is what is academically expected of me." (F.French), and "The one thing I really need to know about college is what is expected of me." (M. History). The development of these expectations are pregnant with possibilities for the orientation program. Here the entering freshmen are

really asking "What do you want me to do?" They are likely to behave according to the answer.

Other common responses emphasized their need to know how to adjust in general (20%), whether or not college would be a useful experience (8%), how to plan and budget time (6%), and how to choose a major (2%).

The entering freshmen are really asking for the institution to define its impact upon them. They appear to be in the position of the Monopoly Player who has lost the rules and tries to remember an explanation that he can only vaguely recall. Entering freshmen are asking for the institution to show them what it means to become a student. Some randomly selected responses to the item "The one thing I really need to know about college_____" are:

"...my way around," (M.Political Science)

"...what good is it." (M.Social Studies)

"...is what I will gain from it." (F.English)

"...can't really be found out until you get there and see everything for yourself." (F. Psychology)

"...is how to fit in with everything." (F.Mathematics)

"...is what I will have to do to pass." (M. I.A.)

A tentative conclusion that could be drawn from these results of the SOS is that entering freshmen are aware of the fact that they will be facing an environment that is totally different from the one to which they have been accustomed. They are not able to define the change in specific terms and are unable to be certain of the behaviors expected of them. They are, in the classical sense of the word, disoriented. In their effors to find some help, they paint a picture of the professor as a benevolent father who will help and understand. While these efforts will meet with varying degrees of success, one point stands out clearly. Any valid attempt to present these expectations, alternative, appropriate coping behaviors, and sufficient time to find the best one for the individual will reduce this disorientation. The opposite of disorientation is <u>orientation</u>.

We now have some glimpse of the ways in which entering freshmen see themselves relating to the institution. While this is useful knowledge, it has the disadvantage of centering upon long-range goals and objectives. Certainly most people plan for the future, but the most influential determinants of behavior are immediate needs and perceptions. While the entering freshman is looking forward, he is living now and an approach to orientation that looks only at the institution or at graduation lacks much of its potential saliency for the individual.

The final section of the paper presents some of the immediate personal problems which entering freshmen feel they must solve. Much of the modal analysis presented will serve to underline the uniqueness of the individual making up the freshmen class.

One of the very real pitfalls facing persons involved in orientation is their tendency to make the generalization that all freshmen see adjustment to college as their most pressing problem. When queried about their problems only a minority of the entering (25%) indicated that their major problem involved adjustment <u>per se</u>. The largest group (36%) indicated that the problem that they assigned the highest priority was personal in nature. Many of these respondents stated that they could not relate as they would like with other people. Typical responses were: "My most pressing problem is my closeness to so few." (F.French), and "My most pressing problem is reaching people." (F. Psychology). Many other areas of personal problems, from stuttering and overweight to sex and religion were mentioned. Another group (18%) indicated that their problem was money, either the lack of capital or the fear of debt. A small group (4%) felt that their most pressing problem centered on their changing relationship with their parents.

Typically, entering freshmen are concerned with the discrepency between the way they see themselves presently and the way they might be. Many see college as the vehicle which they might use to realize their potential. None, however, mention the methods they might use to achieve their goals, probably due to their inexperience with their

new environment. Others indicate their fear of this environment by describing problems of adjustment. The needs of both of these groups must be met in some fashion if an orientation program is to have its maximum impact upon students. Here are some typical responses to the item: "My single most pressing problem_____."

"...is money." (F. Mathematics)

"...is overweight." (F.Mathematics)

"...is that I can't seem to please everyone; and I'm losing my religion." (F.Education)

"...is my inability to concentrate on a problem fully." (M. I.A.)

"...is how to earn enough money for expenses at college. (F. Science)

"...the apprehension of college life." (M. Mathematics)

While problems shed a good deal of light on a person's immediate concerns, fears are derived from the core of his personality. A person cannot fear something unless it strikes at the very heart of the way he sees and maintains himself. Fear is a strong emotion and can be induced only by strong stimuli.

Entering freshmen express three major catagories of fears. They are most afraid of the transition from high school to college, their perceived inadequacies (36%), and their personal problems. (19%). Other significant responses included a fear of death (8%) and a fear of being alone (4%). While these results are indicative of the possible sources of fear which freshmen face, the responses can be analyzed still further.

A large number of respondents (19%) indicated that their fears were personal and not directly related to the college experience. For example: "I am most frightened about women and their effect on me." (M. Mathematics) Orientation personnel probably will be able to do very little to help the individual find a solution to these very real personal fears, except to be aware of the existence of these types of problems and to actively seek to avoid placing entering freshmen in a situation that could cause serious psychological damage.

Many (18%) expressed a fear of failure, both academic and social. These ranged from "I am most frightened about the fact that I could flunk out." (F.Education), to a more positive, "I am most frightened about not realizing my potential." (M. Undecided). A similar number (18%)expressed fear of the transition to college in general. "I am most frightened about the thought of this transition - from high school to college." (M. English) is the way one student stated it. Others spoke of fears about their society (6%), the future (10%), death (8%), and loneliness(4%).

In general, entering freshmen are frightened about the future and their relationship to their new environment in particular. They want to make the transition from high school to college as easily as possible without any experiences that are damaging to the way they see themselves. The fears that are typically expressed are the same fears normally expressed by anyone who is about to enter a new environment. Entering freshmen are, in many ways, like a person about to spend an extended period of time in a foreign country. They wonder if they will be successful in their venture, if they will "fit in with the natives", if they can adjust to the new food, and if they can cope with the inevitable feelings of loneliness. These fears are heightened by the typical feelings of insecurity in late adolescence and one entering freshman summed up many responses when he said, "I am most frightened about looking stupid." (M.Mathematics).

Some typical responses to the item, "Iam most frightened about_____." are:

"....death." (M. Undecided)

"....being alone in college." (F. Undecided)

"....orientation and my first week up there." (F. Undecided)

"....failing and being homesick." (F. Mathematics)

"....choosing a major." (M. English)

"....being drafted and sent to a mortal death." (M. Chemistry)

If any single generalization emerges from the mountain of data collected from the SOS, it is this: No generalization about entering freshmen is possible. When the

entering freshmen class bursts upon the campus, it will be a collection of unique individuals whose closest ties is their common status as college freshmen. This generalization poses an interesting, but difficult problem to those involved in the orientation of entering freshmen. How do you provide an answer to the questions about college that will satisfy so many different persons? The answer given by the SOS is clear. It cannot be done, but the SOS also provides a helpful approach. Freshmen may come to college for different reasons and with different goals in mind, but most seem to be seeking the college's expectations of them and ways to meet these expectations. In the definition of these expectations, orientation personnel can in large measure determine the nature of future students.